Brilliance

Book: 85

Nevaeh

Marcel Ray Duriez

23 Washed Out Colors

'Do you want him to come here?' Melchor asks slowly, his eyes slightly bewildered.

I shrug, then wince as pain rushes through my body. Now something hurts other than my head and throat. Everything hurt. I glance at my body nestled beneath the blankets. Nothing looked strange or out of

place - but it was not the normal, sore pain I was used to with my frequent accidents and clumsiness.

'Lily?'

'No, it is better that he comes. He will be anxious.'

'And you?'

I stare at Melchor, not understanding his question or his baffled tone. 'You have to take my vitals.' I murmur finally, wanting some sort of distraction for myself and for Melchor. He was watching me. Waiting for me to speak, to answer his question.

He nods, rearranging his features to remove any signs of his confusion. 'Yes, I suppose I do need to do that.' He stands up, reaching for the binder that was placed on the foot of the bed. He pulls a pen from his jacket, scribbling some notes onto the papers. 'Are you in any pain?'

'My throat.' I mumble, and then I immediately flood with embarrassment. I had already complained about that once. 'My head, too.' I add quickly, as if that would pull his attention away from my repetition.

I lift my wrist, reaching up to touch my head. But my hand and wrist were covered in a thick white cast, shifting my attention from my headache. A small breath of shock escapes my lips.

Melchor moves to my side instantly, gently taking my encased hand in his.

'You have a concussion, Lily.' He says slowly. His fingers rub small circles on the exposed parts of my fingers as I stare at my hand.

My fingers tremble slightly, and my stomach churns. 'You said - the nurse.' I whisper, feeling hot tears pooling in my eyes.

'It is a small fracture in your wrist. It will heal easily.'

I shake my head, trying to will the tears away while also trying to remember how I had broken it. My mind seemed utterly blank. Void of any memories connected to my wrist.

'I do not - I cannot. I cannot remember.' I whisper, frantically. 'Why? Why can't I remember?'

'What do you remember, Lily?' Melchor asks me gently.

I swallow thickly, feeling overwhelmed by the confused emotions rushing through me. I close my eyes, a strange sense of betrayal washing over me as my tears fall onto cold cheeks. They made my vision blur in a way that discomforted me immensely.

What did I remember?

The nurse. With her cold eyes and thin-set lips and curt voice. My headache - splitting and heated. The icy coldness of my body as I awoke. Watercolor images. Pictures blurred together in a strange way.

'What's that?'

How did I explain the dull colors that made no sense? I looked at Melchor, opening my mouth to explain, but I was not sure how to. Looking at him, through my tears, sends my heart into a frenzy. It takes me a moment to realize that the drum in my ears is not one Melchor is playing.

With a jolt of pain in my stomach, I dimly remember the blonde

hair of someone else. And the pain I begged to disappear - begging Melchor, begging Chiaz, begging someone else.

I pull my hand from Melchor's grasp, feeling as if he was squeezing it too hard. My wrist seared with pain, though his grasp was light and easily pushed away.

'Lily,' Melchor says gently. 'Breathe.'

There was an erratic beeping in my ears. I wanted to pound my hands against my ears to make it stop. I yank my hand furiously, wanting to wipe the traitorous tears from my eyes. Except there is a tugging on my hand that is entirely unpleasant and makes me freeze in place.

A thin, clear tube was running beneath the layers of bandages wrapped around my hand.

'Take it out!' My throat burned with every word, but my head hurt more. Pressure threatened to make my entire skull explode with every word I screeched.

The memories flood back into my brain. A tsunami of pain, of fear, of helplessness. The look of enjoyment and the depth of peace in his eyes as he tormented me. And watercolors. Dulled, watery colors. And a drug that induced them.

My hands fly to my stomach, feeling a pin-prick pain before I remember the drug is in my hand now.

'Take it out!' I plead, my cast hand hovering over my other, my fingers grasping the tube. Melchor's cool fingers pull them away. 'I want to leave.' My voice trembles with the shivering of my body. 'Take me home.

Melchor, take me home.'

But not home. Do not ever take me back to that house. I never want to go back.

'Lily, listen to me,' Melchor urges, his finger on my chin so I would look at him. I wanted to rip the tube out myself, and I could barely scrape my eyes away from my hand to look at Melchor.

'Take me home. I want to go.' I beg, my sore throat a long-forgotten pain. I wrathfully wipe my cheeks, brushing away stinging tears as quickly as they were falling. My hands were shaking - my bones turning to ice within my body and freezing me from the inside out. I wanted to scream - I could not see with my tears, and I could not brush them away with my shaking hands.

'There's no needle, Lily. It is just a plastic tube, that is all.' Melchor professes knowledgeably. His fingers stroked my cheeks, helping me wipe away my tears. 'It is saline to keep you hydrated and morphine to help with your pain. Nothing more.'

'I don't want it.' I plead, hiccupping a sob. 'Take it out.'

Melchor was lying. There was no way I could be in this much pain if I had morphine in my IV.

The air around me seemed entirely too hot, and each breath scorched my lungs. I shoved his hand away from my face, crying out as it hurt to move so suddenly.

Melchor eventually nods slowly, his golden eyes watching me pitifully. 'Alright.'

His resignation shocked me for a moment, and then I turned immediately to desperation. I shove my hand at him, and he reaches for the tubing connecting my hand to the IV bag, detaching the two.

'No.' I protest, shaking my head, feeling the betrayal return with uncontrolled force. 'No. All of it. Melchor, please. Take it all out.'

Melchor hesitates now, looking pained. He grasps my hand in both of his, squeezing. I flinch, violently yanking my hand back.

My stomach rolls with nausea as phantom fingers crawl over my broken wrist, squeezing it until pain explodes within. My head hurts then, at the back, as if I had banged it against something hard. I knew I had not moved, though.

I wrap my IV-ridden hand over my cast, rubbing it to push the pain away.

'Lily, the IV is so we do not have to constantly inject you with needles. You need pain medicine and antibiotics.'

'No.' I shake my head, ignoring how much the movement increased the churning of my stomach. 'No medicine.'

He was wiping my face again. I am not sure why - I was crying so much it did not help at all.

'You had surgery. You need it or you will be in pain, sweetheart.'

I flinch at his words. Sweetheart. Had he ever called me that before? I could not remember. I squeeze my eyes shut, as if that would push away all the hurt and pain.

'Please.'

Melchor looks reluctant, but he cages. His fingers start working at the tape and gauze holding the tube in my hand. A sob of relief escapes my lips, and my head drops against my pillows.

'Better?' he asks softly. I pull my hand to chest, grateful that the tugging of the IV tubing is gone, replaced only by a slight stinging where it once had been.

I nod, swallowing thickly. No more medicine. No more needles.

My chest hurt, but the air was cooling. I close my eyes again, wanting the darkness to envelop the pain the way it enveloped me before.

'I want to go.'

'I think that's wise.' Melchor says quietly after a long pause. 'Your father will be coming soon. He should see you first.'

'Don't take me back.' A shudder rolls over my spine, thinking back to my room. It had been my sanctuary. My space. The place Melvin and I grew to know each other. I never wanted to go back there again. I open my mouth to clarify - do not take me back home, but please take me out of here. But Melchor responds before I can.

'We won't.' He promises. 'Lily.' He hesitates, battling himself. 'Do you remember?'

My stomach churns. 'It is blurry. watercolors' My voice is strained, and my eyes hazy with tears again. My fingers kneed at my cast, rubbing away the pain.

Melchor is silent for a long time, and I must open my eyes to ensure he is still in the room with me. He is a statue, on the chair, watching me.

'You should get some rest.' He finally says. 'Your father will be here shortly.'

My heart beats with a bizarre feeling of rejection. His response - even delivered in his soft voice - still rang with dismissal.

'Melchor?'

He looks at me, waiting.

'you said. With the nurse. That this was her fault.'

He grimaces, turning away as he speaks. 'I apologize, Lily. I should not have spoken ill of her.'

'Why?'

He turns to me, looking remorseful. 'I suspect she wants the inside information before anyone else.'

'She won't.'

'Your file will be safe in my office - away from prying eyes.' He offers reassuringly. 'It'll remain there, and I'll have her off your case immediately.'

'I remember. talking. before.' I cringe, remembering the muffled words that carried.

Melchor nods. 'Yes - I have spoken to them already. Both Melvin and Naddalin Natalie are confident they can be trusted. If anything gets

out, we will know.'

'Naddalin Natalie?' I feel the blood drain from my face. I looked sharply. Why hadn't Naddalin Natalie seen what happened? Why hadn't she helped me? 'She didn't see.'

Melchor frowns, squeezing my fingers in his reassuringly. 'She didn't know what happened until you were already here.'

I gulp. My mind racing through what I could remember of being here. I shiver, remembering the loud voices and the anger vibrating from Chiaz's body to me. 'Jake?'

'He left as soon as I took you from him.'

I close my eyes, feeling the fatigue stronger now.

He left. Chiaz left.

'Sleep, Lily. We will have time to talk later.' Melchor tells me tenderly. He pats the blankets around my trembling hands.

Neither of us say anything more.

My mind is scattered with fragments of pain and screaming, reflecting images of a pale man with blue eyes against my closed eyelids.

I am unsure of whether Melchor has left the room until he is pressing a warm towel to my forehead and mopping tears, I had not realized I was shedding a soft napkin.

I am not sure when the images bridge to dreams, but they hold me captive in terror either way.

The words as a sharp snarl from my mouth. Naddalin Natalie looks

at me, her expression completely masking the terror in her thoughts. She pressed the gas pedal down the furthest it could go. The needle of the speedometer was just beyond the highest painted tick mark, indicating the car was going over the maximum of 155 miles per hour.

Naddalin Natalie pushed her foot down harder, and none of us missed the groan of the metal under her foot. Even Dejen was getting frustrated in the back seat.

Naddalin Natalie's thoughts were a furious storm of visions. How she had missed a decision that endangered Lily's life, no one knew. But now she was searching for every remote possibility - looking years into the future - ensuring Lily survived. The results were infuriatingly unclear.

'You cannot show up on foot, Ed ward. What will Charlie think?'

'It doesn't matter.' I snarled in response.

'You can't see her if you're freaking dead, Melvin.' Dejen had grabbed my arm, physically holding me in place. 'The Chief's going to kill you unless you have an alibi.'

I laughed maniacally, imagining the Chief with his gun trying to hunt me down. If only he knew.

'The only logical conclusion would be that you were close enough to walk. Which means you were close enough to do this to her. You need an alibi. You need to be out of town.' Naddalin Natalie insisted. 'You need to arrive when Lily is out of surgery - after her father is there, after the news has spread. We will drive.'

I surrendered, knowing Naddalin Natalie and Dejen were entirely

right. Charlie would attempt to blame the entire situation on me and arrest me on the spot if I did not have solid proof that I was out of town.

It was decided by Naddalin Natalie that we would drive to Spokane to camp. Karly met us in Dejen's jeep and then we drove. Not toward McAuley Hospital, toward Spokane. We collected receipt documenting food, gas, motel reservations, and even a camp site ticket. If the police needed proof, we would have it.

'None of the timings correspond to our story.' Naddalin Natalie had said, her mind racing as she thought of gaps in our tale. Dejen, sitting in the back, rubbed ink off, spilled coffee, and tore receipts until they corresponded with our plan.

It was massively frustrating - meeting Karly in Ellensburg, taking the car she had brought, and slowly driving down to McAuley again. Each stop at a motel or gas station, waiting as Naddalin Natalie refueled a full car, destroyed me. But there was little I could do.

'Hurry up.' I spit through ground teeth.

Naddalin Natalie's visions were flashing through my mind - Lily dead in her room. Lily dead in the hospital. Lily dead in the woods. Lily dead in Volterra.

'Enough!'

Naddalin Natalie did not hear me. She was grappling with her visions. Why hadn't she seen Lily was in danger? Why hadn't she seen a decision made that put Lily in danger? Why was she seeing these visions now?

Lily dead in the meadow.

'Stop!'

Naddalin Natalie jumps at my voice, her concentration interrupted. 'I don't understand.'

'Fifty visions of Lily.' I choke on the word. She was not dead. Melchor said she was not.

'I don't understand.' Naddalin Natalie whispers again, shaking her head.

'Believe me, it's illustrative enough.' I snarl. 'Dejen, call Melchor.'

Dejen pulls his phone out without a word, dialing quickly. I soak up Melchor's voice as the two converses. Lily was fine. Her injuries were not life threatening. She was out of surgery.

Naddalin Natalie's vision masks mine. Lily in her bedroom, bleeding, in pain.

Someone was going to pay for her blood.

The moment I had seen Naddalin Natalie's vision - Lily writhing in pain in Melchor's ER - I had waged war against the Mutts. I could perfectly see it in my mind, my plot constructed in a fraction of a second and executed within the hour. I would run to La Push and single-handedly destroy the mutt that Lily called her friend. I would destroy anyone who got in my way, anyone who tried to protect him, and anyone who tried to stop me. They could not win when I could anticipate their every move before they did it. They could not rival my anger. The monster in me was filled with glee. Their blood did not tempt me but killing was not against my instincts

as a vampire.

The soul and heart Lily's love emanated for was not repelled. I was not a monster - I was riding the world of monsters. Those mutts deserved it. They were accusing us of harming humans when their rap sheet was becoming if ours.

Melchor was quick to pull me from my fantasy. His call came only moments after Lily arrived - quickly urging us to return home. In a rush to get to surgery he scarcely had time to explain that Chiaz Naztherth had been to accuse me of the crime when he had brought Lily to the hospital. Melchor had not told us what happened, but it was painfully clear from Naddalin Natalie's vision. The thought of it made me sick - a feeling I had not experienced in a century. In learning of his innocence, I could not channel my emotion onto Chiaz Naztherth's murder.

Just six hours I had been away. The thought made me more furious than I could stand. Six hours unprotected was all it took.

I wince, my hand gripping the plastic of the door handle so tightly it cracks.

Lily dead in her car.

We were only miles away from town, and Naddalin Natalie rammed the car down to eighty miles an hour. I seethed at her, wanting to break the door off and run to the hospital. I would be there in a quarter of the time.

As if he could read my mind, Dejen puts his hand on my shoulder. 'Don't even think about it.' He warns, raises an eyebrow.

I shoved his hand away, snarling. 'Drive faster, Naddalin Natalie.'

Naddalin Natalie shouts at me with a glare. You know I want to get to her as much as you do. But we must maintain our image for now.

Naddalin Natalie's mind was a swirl of potential futures for us, but she was utterly inhibited by her concern over why she had not had a vision prior to Lily arriving at the hospital. She was furious with herself, and terrified. What other things had she missed?

I wondered the same question.

I could only think that Chiaz Naztherth was not as innocent as he seemed. He was there, conveniently blocking Naddalin Natalie's visions. He had been involved.

I would hunt him down to find out. The mutt would not be able to hide his thoughts when he saw me.

Naddalin Natalie pulls up to the small garage of the hospital, smoothly pulling into a spot close to the door. I was out of the car before she had thrown it into gear.

Decades of training to act like a human gave me enough insight not to run at full speed, but I was close to breaking every human-trained instinct of mine now. Melchor might berate me for not acting human, but I cared little for my own welfare in this moment.

I could smell her blood. A floral essence gone bitter from seeping out of her body.

Dejen catches up to me easily, laying his large hand on my shoulder again and yanking me to slow me down. I do not shake him off this

time. Even though I knew I might need him to restrain me.

'Karly is in Melchor's office. Let us wait there for now.' Naddalin Natalie tells me as she glides over. She is more collected than we are, but only in physical form. Her eyes now reflect the panic of her thoughts. Panic that ruminates though my entire body.

I should not have left. I knew better than to leave. Not with Victoria on the run still. Not weeks after narrowly escaping death by the Voltari. Not with tension from the wolves due to our return. There was too much. Too many loose ends. Too many enemies.

I should not have left.

I follow stiffly after Naddalin Natalie, pushed along by Dejen. I could smell the lingering scent of the Mutt as we walked. He had, as Melchor said, brought Lily here. But he did not stay.

How could he leave?

My eyes were focused on Melchor's thoughts - watching him scribble notes from the surgery onto papers in Lily's folder.

'Vanessa, I'm assigning you to Lily's case.'

'Dr. Shezor, doesn't the chief normally handle assignments?' Vanessa, a young, innocent PA, asks.

'I'll deal with him.'

'Do you have her chart?'

'Document her stats in your notebook for now.' Melchor says, leaving her. Lily's folder was sealed away in his office.

'How bad?' I say under my breath. I knew he could hear me.

I will be up in a moment. He responds.

Naddalin Natalie opens the door to Melchor's office. Karly was pacing the length of it, her expression one of horror.

'Melvin,' she breathes, her eyes full of tears.

'How is she?' I demand. 'Have you seen her yet?'

Karly shakes her head sadly. 'I only just got here. Melchor said she was awake, but he sedated her again.'

My hands turn to my fists at my side. Not only had she been alone when the attack happened - with no one to protect her - but she had woken up and found herself without me yet again.

'Jae and Vivian have gone to Lily's house. They are trying to see if they can track the scent.' Karly says, spying on Dejen and Naddalin Natalie. 'You may want to go, too.'

Naddalin Natalie shakes her head defiantly. 'I need to be here. Charlie will need me.'

'I'll go.' Dejen stands up, his muscles bulging. 'He's a dead man the second I have him within my sights.'

'Make him suffer.' Naddalin Natalie hisses. Torture him until he regrets it.

My stomach twisted in confliction, wanting to accompany Dejen, and wanting to stay and see Lily.

That monster, whoever he was, hurt my mate. My Lily. I needed to

be the one to destroy him.

I twitch as Dejen leaves, desperately wanting to follow him out of the hospital. Karly grabs my hand, her fingers wrapping around mine.

'She needs you, Melvin.' She whispers, her voice thick with emotion. I tried in vain to ignore Karly's thoughts - the memories of the abuse she faced at the hands of her first husband. She needs you here.

'I need to kill him.' I steel, unable to control myself enough to prevent the way I hiss the words at my mother.

Karly shakes her head, agreeing. 'There's time for that. They will call when they find something. But Lily is here now, and she was asking for you.'

My dead heart wrenches in my chest - the closest it had come to beating in over a century. I swallow thickly, my throat burning as I look and feel the thick scent of blood. I had not hunted.

The door swings open and Melchor walks in, bringing in the heavy perfume of Lily's blood. His expression was a mix of so many things I had never seen from him before - anger, exhaustion, grief.

'I didn't see.' Naddalin Natalie whispers to him, breaking the silence that followed his wake. 'Not until she was here. Melchor, what happened to her?'

'You know as well as I do.' He mutters, cringing.

I could hear jealousy in his thoughts. It was a surprisingly potent emotion against his normally calm, tamed ones.

All the doctors who had treated Lily upon her arriving were planning to go home, get absolutely wasted and forget about today's patient. Melchor, who had been at peace with his being for centuries, yearned to be human now. He yearned to join them and distance himself from the patient he was presented with today. He yearned to incapacitate himself and blur his memories, so remarkably similar and different to the way Lily's had been blurred.

I swallow thickly, turning away from him as if it would tune out his mental voice.

I very much wanted it too. I wanted to forget this, even for a few depressing hours. I wanted my memories of this to be forever altered in an alcohol-induced daze. A few shots of hard liquor on a mostly empty stomach would be satisfactory. But I would never be able to haze these moments and memories.

'Have the police been informed?' Karly asks. 'They'll want information about her. From you.' Karly covers her mouth, shaking her head. I cringe, wishing I did not have her fearful tenor of her thoughts invading my mind.

Melchor shakes his head. 'I persuaded them against it. To wait for Charlie to come.' He sits down on the couch, dropping his head into his hands. Karly moves to his side, sitting next to him. They did not do the rape exam, yet. She was barely conscious when she came in. It would have been a clear violation of her body and mind.

Another one. I think furiously.

Melchor's thoughts were sharp in my head. I could see Lily in his

memories. Her body on the gurney, twisting in pain. Her speech was disjointed and slurred. Her brown eyes open, clouded, and unfocused. The first indication was that she was intoxicated. Then Melchor smelled the drug in her blood, and he knew what had happened.

I could see how Lily reacted to him touching her. How, to treat her injuries, they stripped her of the clothes Chiaz must have thrown at her. She did not even notice.

I can see, in his memories, the hand-shaped marks developing on her skin. The shadow of bruises on her jaw and neck. The confusion, fear, and pain in her eyes. The hoarse way her words slipped out from the effort she had extended before.

I swear loudly, my hand slamming onto Melchor's solid wood desk. A piece of it splinters, dropping to the floor.

Melchor's eyes snap to mine, realizing at once what he had inadvertently shared. He quickly pushes his memories away, grimacing. Karly looks at me with pitiful eyes, but I pay no attention to her.

I needed to get out of here. I needed to hunt. I needed to kill him.

I take a shaky breath, trying to steady myself. I am trying to force the monster away, to resolve my anger. I needed to stay. I needed to take care of Lily.

'Melvin, she'll be okay.' Melchor tells me, his voice strong with conviction. 'Her injuries are not life threatening. The surgery was minor.'

Naddalin Natalie's visions flash through my mind. Lily dead in her kitchen. Lily dead in my arms. Lily dead at school.

I scoff, seeing red. 'Physically. Mentally is another field, you know that.'

I turn away from him, bringing my fists to my eyes as if that would block out the world. I forced myself to ignore Melchor - his thoughts spoken and unspoken. Naddalin Natalie's mind was just as loud as Melchor and in blocking him, I saw hers.

She was searching, again. But every vision was muddled and uncertain, constantly changing and shifting. But nothing was clear. Nothing made sense. No person was concrete, no scene was specific. The visions of Lily dead slipped in and out - sometimes present, sometimes nothing but a difficult memory. It was making her anxious. She was sure about the future, not like this.

She had never missed a weighty decision, not since Lily jumped off the cliff. Naddalin Natalie had been watching her. Naddalin Natalie had not missed anything.

I needed to be away from her - away from her failure that inhibited Lily's safety.

'She's sedated now.' Melchor breaks the silence that was growing thick with tension. 'Charlie is with her now.'

He was resisting his thoughts, trying to block out his encounter with Lily when he had woken up in her room. I catch small glimpses of it, still. A painful ball forms in my stomach as I see signs of her remembering what had happened.

I take a deep breath, trying to control my rage. If only Jae was

here. I stole the thought away. No - Jae had to be with Dejen and Vivian. They needed to hunt. Jae was the most skilled fighter amongst us. He needed to be there.

'I need to see her.' I insist.

'Charlie is with her, Melvin.' Karly responds gently. 'Give him a moment.'

I hiss, shaking my head. 'I left her for six hours, and now our reunion is here. Naddalin Natalie will talk to Charlie.'

'Actually, I will.' Melchor stands up, running a hand through his hair. 'I want to talk to him about bringing her home. She will not do well here.' And I do not want her to be forced into consenting to unnecessary exams and tests.

His thought was not for me, it was for himself. His grief, over watching Lily tormented in the ER with his hands was more than he could take.

Karly stands, too. 'I will see if I can talk with him. I am not sure he will be open to the idea of it at all. You should come too, Melvin?'

I look to Naddalin Natalie, wondering if she thought it would be wise. She simply shrugs, looking petulantly into the future in search of something.

I follow my parents from the office to Lily's room several floors above us.

Prepare yourself, Melvin. Melchor instructs as we walk. She will not wake for a few more hours. Either way, it will be difficult for you.

I do not respond. Difficult for me? I was enraged. I wanted to tear apart the man - the monster - that did this to her. Difficult was not the word I would call it. It certainly was not a word I would use for both Lily and I at that moment.

Melchor shouts at me for a look, reminding me to stay calm. Charlie needs to be convinced of your innocence before anything else.

Lily's room was dark - a few monitors and a small lamp illuminating it. I was unsurprised to find Charlie sitting in a vinyl chair, his eyes rimmed red. His thoughts are buried in a report that was dropped off at his desk for the fourth time in the past two months.

Riley Biers, 19, read it. The college student had gone missing in Altoona weeks ago.

Charlie's thoughts were full of gratitude - gratitude it had not been his daughter, even now as she lay sedated in the bed. He was thankful he did not need to send out a search party - grateful that, even if she was hurt, he at least knew where she was. At least he was certain she was not dead.

'Charlie,' Karly starts, her voice gentle, motherly. 'We came as soon as we heard.'

He stands up, surprised by our presence. His eyes dart around, spying on me behind my parents, and his expression turns mutinous. 'Get. Out!' He roars, his hand twitching to the gun on his belt. His heart was pounding rapidly.

His thoughts were muddled, racing. He was trying to figure out whether to shoot me or handcuff me and slam my face into the tiled floor.

I freeze. In my haste to get here, to get to Lily and to ensure her safety, I had forgotten Naddalin Natalie's warning. In my own thoughts and rage, I barely heard Charlie's. Charlie stalks closer to me, his heart pounding furiously in his chest with stress. He was seething - nearly spitting at me in fury.

Charlie hated me for what I had put Lily through. Of course, he would try to put this on me.

If the situation were not so serious, I might have laughed. He had nothing on me. He would never be able to get to me. And if he did, his handcuffs and gun would hardly make this easier for him. He knew this, though. His thoughts as he glared at me, and my parents, were apprehensive. He knew he could not take us on, even if he did not know why.

I applauded him for wanting to defend her, for knowing he was outnumbered and ill-equipped and still taking a stand. Though, his desire to protect the sedated girl in the bed barely rivalled mine, despite the parental connection. My connection with her would always be stronger than his. His emotions paled in comparison to mine - heightened by my being a vampire. If he truly knew my feelings for her, he might not be fantasizing about murdering me himself. I wanted to think his usefulness was nothing compared to mine, but Lily had been attacked under the protection of us both.

'I didn't do this, Chief Black.' I told him, trying to keep my voice level and calm. There was no need to be defensive - that would only spite him further. If anything, though, his thoughts became even more seditious

at my words.

He bares his teeth. 'I don't believe you for a second, kid.'

'He didn't do this, Charlie.' Melchor repeats calmly. His voice was level, his eyes sincere. His mind simultaneously frustrated that we had forgotten to appease Charlie to my innocence while also trying to find a way to placate him now. Our minds were busy with other thoughts.

Charlie abandons the thought of attacking me or shooting me - both would land him in prison and grant me an easier sentence due to excessive force during arrest.

Charlie's thoughts were amusing as he imagined calling his deputies to demand a warrant for my arrest of me. He was torn - he wanted to do it himself, having imagined arresting me ever since I left Lily and McAuley months ago. But he wanted to stay by her side.

I related to him on that level. Both of us desperate to be the one to catch the offender, but unable to leave the girl we loved. My eyes float beyond Charlie, staring at the girl in the bed for the first time since I had entered the room.

'Oh, god.' My voice is a strangled whisper.

The room was small, and yet she looked miniscule in comparison. Her normally pale skin completely lacked color. Her complexion was on par with mine. A deep purple bruise was forming along her cheekbone, and several of them were already shadowing her jaw and neck just as I had seen in Melchor's memories. The previous exposure to her facial injuries did little to reduce the fury I felt.

My thoughts shot to Chiaz then. How had he done it? How had he dropped her off at the hospital and disappeared? How did he leave her in the hands of his sworn enemy and run away from the girl he loved?

My teeth clamped together at the thought. He did not love her. Not like I did. He lusted at her. Like so many others.

'Don't defend him!' Charlie seethes, his voice loud. I wince at the hatred in his voice. My eyes shot at Lily, worried that she would wake. Some assault victims grew fearful of loud noises, but Lily remained perfectly still. She was still sedated. Not even slightly disturbed by Charlie's outburst. The scent of morphine was strong in the room and her veins.

'Charlie,' Melchor starts, looking slightly exasperated. Melchor was always calm, collected, and patient. I had rarely seen him lose his temper in the decades I had known him. But now he was tired - his mood strangely parallel to how he felt upon finding Vivian in the street.

Melchor's unusual frustration, and Naddalin Natalie's rare uncertainty, were making me anxious.

'How can you be so calm? He hurt my daughter.' I knew it was a bad idea when they started going out. Charlie rambles, his face is red with anger. 'This is my daughter!' He is going to prison. Even longer if I can help it.

Charlie's hands ball into fists as he debates throwing a few punches, bruising me up the way he thought I had bruised Lily. I retreated a step back, knowing full well that if things turned physical, I would not be able to control myself. I had too much anger coursing through me. I would have to rely on Melchor to defuse this situation. Charlie would be in very

real danger if he came after me now.

'Somehow, I am delusional to think that five foster kids would be anything but destruction in this town. And my delusions meant my daughter got harmed.'

Seething words fill my head - not ones spoken aloud. Charlie pauses his breathing rapidly, before opening his mouth to continue.

Karly beats him to it. 'Watch your words around me, Chief.' Karly's eyes flash angrily as she speaks. Charlie stutters into silence, shocked by her outburst. Karly could command a room, though few had seen it. 'Not one of my children has ever given you reason to distrust them.'

Charlie hesitates, unsure of Karly's anger and how to proceed.

'Melvin loves Lily more than you know.' Karly continues, furious. 'So do the rest of my kids.'

Melchor puts his hand on Karly's arm, trying to calm her, but she shakes him off.

'Don't you ever accuse my children of anything like that again.' Karly threatens.

'Charlie, most of our kids were camping this weekend, including Melvin.' Melchor explains quietly. I am not sure when he produced this story - or whether he knew Naddalin Natalie had receipts to back it up. With Melchor needing to be in surgery, we never communicated the plan. 'They had been on the road since this morning - well before Lily was attacked.'

The ease with which Charlie's mind shifted to accommodate this added information indicated how weakly he believed that I was to blame.

Shock courses through me as I realize just how little I understood Charlie's mind. His anger, his thoughts - they were a deep pool I barely tapped into.

Charlie was fuming, still, unable to determine who to blame. But his anger was dissipating, leaving him exhausted and miserable without anger to mask it.

'Who the hell did this?' He demands weakly, his eyes shifting between me and Melchor.

'I'm not sure either of us can answer that.' Melchor responds. 'I don't think she does, either.'

'Let me assure you, that in your search for her attacker, my children are innocent.' Karly points a firm finger in Charlie's direction, clearly still livid. Melchor touches Karly's back gently, reminding her that Charlie was not an enemy. He was a father, just as she was a mother.

Melchor sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. 'Karly,' he murmurs under his breath. 'He understands.'

'Good.' Karly snaps. If he even attempts. I swear I will stop him myself. I will stop any investigation myself.

'Did she say anything?'

Melchor shakes his head, grimacing. 'We had to sedate her early on. She was scared and disoriented - we were not able to treat her. Charlie, she was given Rohypnol.'

Charlie pales at the mention of the drug he had heard of so often. Sexual assault was a rare occurrence in McAuley. Most crime Charlie had dealt with was petty - break-ins or vandalism by high school delinquents and

the occasional domestic dispute or speeding ticket. Even still, he understood the severity of Melchor's words.

This had been planned. She had been picked. The attacker - the rapist - had gone to her home.

'I'm sorry.' Charlie mumbles, collapsing into his chair. 'I shouldn't have thrown around that accusation.' Even if he did leave Lily comatose and cause her to run off to California with no more than a note.

'We all want to lay the blame on someone.' I respond quietly. Karly nods, obviously seeing the benefit in peace.

'Chiaz Naztherth brought her here, Charlie.' Melchor says. 'Did you know that?'

Charlie looks up, shock masking his thoughts. 'No.' Wonder why he did not tell me. He has not even called. He pales suddenly, stuttering. 'He did not. He - He did not do this?'

'No, no.' Melchor says, shaking his head. 'He thought it was Melvin.'

'Oh.' Charlie's relief is apparent in his expression.

'Charlie, can Karly and I talk with you in the hall?' Melchor asks, gesturing to the hall. 'It's important - about Lily's care.'

Charlie looks from Melchor to Karly, then to me. His eyes narrowed at me.

I just want some time alone with Lily. He huffs, finally nodding. He follows them out into the hall.

I felt relieved, grateful that Charlie was not pressed about my involvement in this. He had been easy to talk down, suggesting he really did not believe it was me.

My legs carry me to the bed, and I stiffly sit beside her legs.

'I'm so sorry, Lily.' I whisper, my fingers tracing the blurred edges of the bruise on her cheekbone. 'I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you.'

My mind swirls back to the woods. Naddalin Natalie, mid-hunt, freezing as her vision clouds her instincts. The gasp of horror escaped her mouth, drew my attention to her thoughts. And then the ringing of her phone - incessantly. Dejen had yanked it from her pockets while she and I were trapped, watching the vision repeatedly.

Lily crying, pleading, thrashing against hands that held her back. And Melchor, his eyes darting from one injury to the next, realizing what had happened with a pure fury I had never seen him possess.

It was difficult to picture Lily - screaming and panicking - when I was looking at this one - silent, still, and asleep. I could not imagine the immense pain she was in, and the additional pain she inadvertently put herself through by moving and jostling her injuries.

I touch her hand, covered in a thick cast. I do not know what bones she had broken in her hand. But the thought infuriated me. He had broken her bones. He had bruised her face. He had done the unimaginable.

I take another deep breath, eager to quell my anger with her scent. But I am met with something entirely different. Her efflorescent aroma mixed with the scents of so many others. It was clear she had been

given at least one blood transfusion during surgery. Chiaz Naztherth's scent was present, too, though not as potent. Melchor was right - Chiaz had not done this. Despite my dislike for him, I felt a surprising sense of gratitude that Lily still had her friend.

But beneath that and the strong antiseptics, I could smell the scent of her attacker. The scent made my body pulse with rage. The scent was potent. It clung to her. Whoever had done this had succeeded in what they wanted with her.

I took a deep breath - memorizing this new scent instead of refreshing my memory of Lily's. I would never forget it, and, if I had to, I would spend the rest of my miserable existence finding the owner of it. From experience, I knew I was a dreadful tracker. But this demon harmed my mate, and they were going to suffer.

My vision is clearer when I open my eyes. I look over, opening my mouth to ask Melchor a question but he is not there. The entire room is illuminated in sunlight dulled by heavy clouds when I was sure it had been dark when I closed my eyes.

'Bells,' Charlie's gruff voice grasps my attention. I automatically turned toward his voice, cringing as the movement sent spasms of pain down my neck. He was sitting in a vinyl chair, his expression a mask of grief.

My chest clenches tightly.

'How do you feel?' He asks.

I barely hear his words. I am looking at his face. His eyes are

surrounded by deep bags, his hair tousled, his skin pale. He looked sickly.

Charlie laughs curtly. 'Don't take care of me, Bells. That is not your job.' He sighs, breathing shakily. 'That's my job. I am supposed to take care of you.'

My stomach feels as if someone punched me. Or someone pressed their knee into me. While holding my easily and ripping my clothes off.

I looked sharply, feeling my lungs collapse under the pressure in my chest.

'You, okay?' Charlie's voice is distant. 'Bells?'

'I'm fine.' I was not. My heart is flying. Each beat jolts grief through my body.

'You look sick.' Charlie's voice is muffled. 'Karly's in the hall.'

Karly. Melvin's beautiful, caramel-haired mother.

Karly was the sweetest, kindest person I had ever met. She was incredibly loving and nurturing to everyone. She was every bit of stability I wanted but never got from my immature, hair-brained mother.

But Karly's disappointment, though hard to receive, was entirely crushing. Dejen always laughed whenever he got scolded by Karly. He found it amusing at times when he and Jae got into trouble for their betting. But this was not as trivial as a bad bet made with my brother. This was my commitment to Melvin and my inability to protect myself.

Karly and Melvin were old-fashioned. Did the two of them value my purity the way others did during their time? I knew Melvin did. There

was no other reason for him to demand marriage before something as personal and intimate as sex or changing me.

I had no time to tell Charlie whether I was accepting of Karly's visit before she quietly dances through the half-open door of my room.

'Lily,' her voice was so soft. 'I'm so happy you're awake, dear.' She walks over to me, her voice a mask of softness and motherly affection. She sits down next to me, her hand finding mine. Her diamond wedding ring twinkles in the dim-lit room. It was a beautiful ring with a sophisticated white diamond set between numerous other smaller ones. The band was twisted white gold resembling the infinity sign.

I once asked her about it. She smiled happily, then, telling me Melchor had asked her to marry him just one year after she had been changed. They had both been dancing around each other, she had told me, absolutely in love with the other but too afraid to admit it. Melchor was worried it would scare her, and Karly was self-conscious of the lasting crush she had on him.

I remember being slightly envious of her and her invincible marriage with Melchor, their incredible everlasting love. My parents were not like that. They had been divorced before I was even two. Melvin and I had a strong, yet complicated, relationship that I often feared was on shattering glass.

I glance at Charlie. He is standing near the door, unsure.

'Are you anxious, dear?'

'I'm fine.' Those were the only words I could muster. Melvin always

said I was a terrible liar, but that was just because he knew me so well. Melvin was inhumanely good at reading people. Karly was not.

A flash of a blond-haired person sends my eyes streaking toward the door. Melchor was here, too.

'How are you feeling, Lily?' Melchor asks.

Would Melvin touch me knowing someone else had?

Melchor had asked me something. My mind was hazy just trying to remember it. I do not think I ever answered him. He moves silently toward Karly, flashing to her side before I blinked. I glance around quickly, worried that Charlie will see. He was not here anymore.

Where did Charlie go?

Karly squeezes my hand, and I yank it back.

'Don't.' I hiss.

'How are you feeling, dear?' Karly's face falls slightly, but her voice is soft.

My head was throbbing. So was my chest. And as I thought about my pain, the more I became aware of it. My neck was sore and stiff propped against the low pillows. My ribs ached, and as I breathed in and out, my whole chest pulsed with pain. So much of my body ached with the movement of my shallow breaths. My stomach ached too, though I had no idea why. It just hurt. But what scared me the most was the deep, pulsing pain between my legs.

I did not want to think about that pain. I did not want to think

about how much it hurt or what he did to me or what he said to me while he did it.

Karly did not know what happened to me there, that is why she had to ask.

She was here, which meant she was not banishing me from her family nor delivering the news of impending removal from Melvin's life. She was not disappointed or disgusted with me yet.

My eyes skip from Karly's to Melchor's and back again.

It is too quiet. I almost wish the beeping on the heart monitor was still here.

The diamond on Karly's hand flickers the light a bit as she squeezes Melchor's hand a little tighter. A time-less diamond ring.

I have been waiting an exceptionally long time for this.

I have been waiting for Melvin.

A small shiver rushes through my body. My slightly thawed bones froze up again. I have been waiting for Melvin, and Melvin's been waiting for me. But he got to me first. Would Melvin ever want me now?

Karly cannot know. She will never let me be with Melvin if she knows. Melvin cannot know either. But Melchor knew. He could not shield his thoughts, and he could not keep this from Karly.

Unless I lied.

Women did this all the time. They always lied about who hurt them or how they got hurt. How mysterious bruises and broken ribs occurred. I

could lie too.

It was nothing. I slipped. I fell down the stairs. I was cleaning the tub. I tripped on the laundry and hit my head on the washing machine. I slipped while mopping the kitchen.

I try to rehearse the lines, trying to figure out which one makes the most sense.

I wish I had Naddalin Natalie to help me. Naddalin Natalie staged the story so perfectly Charlie had no choice but to believe I fell down the flights of stairs in Phoenix. I needed her now.

I force my eyes away from Melchor and Karly, wishing they would go away. Even if I fooled them, I would never fool Melvin. I would never fool Naddalin Natalie.

Should I wait for him to get here so I could get one more kiss, one more glance into his beautiful eyes before he went? Or would another 'clean break', as he had told me many months ago, be better? It did not work last time, so it would not this time either.

A kiss, I decided, would be better than nothing.

'Oh, sweetheart.' Karly breathes. She touches my hand tentatively with hers, almost seeking my permission. 'Please don't shut us out.'

My heart stutters slightly. 'I'm not.' I whisper stiffly.

I wanted one more kiss. Just one more. I could lie enough to get that one kiss, right?

My mind was so foggy. I vaguely remember screaming voices and

Melchor's terrifying order to Chiaz to put me down.

Where had Chiaz found me? I shiver slightly as I remember that I was in my room was he found me and violated me. Did Chiaz find me there, or somewhere else? It did not matter if Chiaz could corroborate my story - by the time he showed up, Melvin would be gone.

I remember Melchor ordering a sedative.

I remember being in the ballet studio in Phoenix when Melchor was taking care of me. He was like this - gentle and comforting.